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ABSTRACT

Russian culture is very much influenced by its huge land area, peculiar topography, and harsh climate. To understand Russian culture one must know how Russians perceive nature. This paper discusses how this concept may be conveyed to U.S. middle school students through poetry. Poems about nature can provide students an opportunity to understand and appreciate Russian attitudes and feelings about the land, the history, and the people. Divided into four headings, the paper discusses: (1) "The Natural World," a poetic recreation of the Russian forests, steppes, and mountains with its plants, animals, and people; (2) "The Russian National Character," poems that depict traditional Russian villages, love, internal problems, external aggression, and political satire; (3) "The Russian Soul," an analysis of spiritual destiny, one of the major themes of Russian poets; and (4) "Ancient Russian Mysticism," poems that explore the spiritual union of man, plants, and the divine. A list of references conclude the document. (KWL)

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TEACHING RUSSIAN CULTURE:

CONCEPTS OF NATURE

by

Dianne Jones

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"It seems we are divorced from nature and have unlaernt to breathe in branches. But in us love is alive to all that's Russian, green, dewy and fragrent."

Yevtushenko

Teaching Russian Culture:Concepts of Nature

Living in a forest world until after the death of Shakespeare, the Russians, like nineteenth century Americans, have had a more constant relationship with nature than we have had. Their culture was one of subsistence farming until the nineteenth century. "Throughout recorded history there has been an average of one poor harvest out of every three, causing shortages and famines. Although the Soviet Union has the largest land area (8.6 million square miles) of any country in the world, its peculiar topography and harsh climate have made life there difficult,(Pipes pp. 5-12). Unlike western countries Russia has been able to intergrate nature into the structured world of man only in the twentieth century. If nature is seen as one of the keys to understanding culture, how do Russians perceive nature? How can we convey these to American middle school students?

Through poetry we discover that the Russians have a unique perception of nature quite different from Europeans or Americans. Even in translation, Russian poetry conveys a depth and richness of meaning that reflects the origins of present Russian national character. These nature poems are not overly

long or intimidating in style, yet they reflect the Russian experience with insight and candor through a vivid portrayal of nature.

In Russia people have special reverence for poets. Poets are heroes whose graves are often kept as shrines visited by groups of admirers. Poetry is Russian life in concentrated form.in that poets combine and fuse the ideas of the people as a whole. (YevtushenKo p.12). This makes poetry an excellent vehicle for teaching American students about Russian culture as part of the social studies or language arts curriculum.

The Natural World

Descriptions of the beauty and mystery of nature abound in Russian poetry. Aesthetic awareness is heightened by exposing students to the poetic recreation of the Russian forests,steppes and mountains with its plants, animals and people. The following represents Sergey Esenin's harmonious view of nature:

Riding; so quiet I can hear
The hoofbeats falling on the snow.
Only the grey crows career
Noisily across the meadow.

Enchanted by an unseen spirit
The forest dozes to a fairy tale of dreams
The pine tree has wrapped itself

As though in a white handkerchief.

(Esenin p. 88)

An American poet's, James Russell Lowell's, "First Snow-Fall" conveya a similar imagery and tone.

The snow had just begun in the gloaming,
And busily all the night
Had been heaping field and highway
With a silence deep and white.

Every pine and fir and hemlock
Wore ermine too dear for an earl,
And the poorest twig on the elm tree
Was ridged inch deep with pearl.

(Lowell pp. 65-66)

While reading these poems have the students compare the images of snow in the two poems, then, cultural similarities and differences will become apparent: the "white handerchief" represents a babushka,or Russian grandmother, while Lowell's image is of jewels and nobility. The perception of (aesthetic) beauty is different: Russians idealize the mother, European cultures the queen. Both poets admire the quiet beauty of the snow. You may want to ask students what larger truth about nature do these poems suggest.

We often see double focus images in videos. Alexander Pushkin uses such a technique with words to merge the image of

grapes with that of a young girl in his poem, "Grapes". After a brief explanation from the teacher this poem can be used to introduce middle school students to the fundamentals of poetic imagery.

Grapes

I shall feel no regret
for roses
Which have faded with the passing of fleeting spring;
I also love the grapes on the vine,
Which have ripened in bunches beneath the hill---
The beauty of my fertile valley,
The delight of golden autumn---
Elongated and transparent,
Like a young girl's fingers.

The Russian steppe is vast, treeless plain which is not as fertile as the American plains. Boris Pasternak created a series of poetic images of aesthetic beauty to portray his genuine love of the steppe.

How wonderful were those sallies into the stillness!
The boundless steppe is like a sea-scape.
The feather-grass sighs, the ants rustle,
And the mosquitoes' whine drifts through the

air.

The mist has overtaken us and surrounds us
like the sea,
The burrs are trailing after the stockings,
And it is wonderful to tramp the steppe like
the seashore----
You sway, you drift,
You are buffeted.

The mist is soporific,
The feather-grass is like honey.
The feather-grass is strewn over the whole
Milky Way.
The mist will disperse, and the night
Will cover the rick and
The steppe on all sides.

(Pasternak pp. 330-331)

Pasternak describes his feelings through the steppe's sights, sounds, taste, and rhythmic movement so well that students relive the experience. Esenin, Pushkin and Pasternak's poetic descriptions of nature evoke affection for their country,and its people. By creating an awareness of the aesthetic appreciation of nature, teachers can establish a common bond between students of our country and those in the

USSR.

The Russian National Character

At the beginning of the twentieth century eighty percent of the Russian population lived in traditional Russian villages. During the 1920's only 26% of the population lived in urban areas, however by the 1960's 64% of the USSR's citizens lived in urban areas (Pipes p. 141).

Contemporary Russian nationalists pay close attention to the Russian village because the village is seen as a repository of values being destroyed by the Soviets whose foremost objective is to develop at any price modern industrial potential(Dunlop p. 120).From Dostoevskii to the present day nationalist writers the village represents their primal source and their roots (Dunlop p. 111). Fedor Abramov listed the virtues which flow to contemporary man from the Russian village: "Boundless self-sacrifice, an alert Russian conscience and sense of duty, the capacity to practice self-limitation and compassion, love of the earth and everything living..." (Dunlop p. 112). Vasili Shukshin's outstandingly successful film (1974), Kalina Krasnaia, portrays an urbanized peasant who yearns for his roots---the countryside, good neighbors, nature and religion (Dunlop p. 118).Shukshin and Abramov present an idealized view of the Russian national character.

"The love for the sickle and hatred for the sword is truly Russian," Zamyatin, a twentieth century Russian essayist and

literary critic wrote. Love was a recurrent theme in Zamyatin's essays. His conception of love was at times nationalistic in character. "The best and most basic quality of the Russian soul is Russian nobleness , Russian gentleness, the love of every blade of grass and of every last man." (Shane pp. 50-51)

Walt Whitman used the image of a blade of grass in an American patriotic poem,"Song of Myself":

I believe a leaf of grass is no less than
the journey-work of the stars...
And the narrowest hinge of my hand
Puts a scorn to all machinery...(st. 31)

Love of the infinite quality of nature and man are part of both cultures. However, there are examples which clearly indicate the sometimes amusing uniqueness of Russia's national identity.

From 1810 until present day writers, such as Yevtushenko and Ivan Krylov have affirmed faith in Russia's national identity and belief in the fortitude of the people. The satirical poem Quartet is a political statement in which Krylov expresses his true feelings about the Russian state (1810), he compares Czar Alexander I and the State Coucil to a monkey, an ass, a goat, and a clumsy bear who try to form a quartet even though they cannot play any instruments. They thought the secret of playing was in where the musicians sat, not in their ability to play the instruments (Stephanov p. 84).

Quartet

"Stop, boys," cries the monkey, "wait a bit;
can't go right like that; you don't know how to sit!
You face viola, bear, with your bassoon;
First fiddle faces second; then, you'll see,
We'll play to quite another tune
And make the hills and forests dance for glee."

The nightingale replies: "To sit is not enough.
Besides, my friends, your ears are much too rough.
Then change your seats and fiddles, too:
Yet chamber music isn't for you!"

(Krylov pp. 84-85)

The poet's attitude toward the czar and his officials, with their presumptuousness and pompous stupidity,is ironic and hostile. The general meaning of the poem is Alexander's reorganization of the government did not benefit the majority of the population because the reforms weren't clear to those whom it concerned. The tasks were poorly defined and beyond the capacity of the people who had to perform them.

Despite internal problems, when threatened by foreign aggressors all the Russian people united in a sweeping national patriotic effort for the sake of their beloved land. Krylov's poem, Wolf in the Kennel portrays Napoleon as the wolf,the enemy, who is no match for the Russian people:

Wolf in the Kennel

A wolf that came to scale the fold by night,
Did on the Kennels light; the Kennels, straight, are
live as day;
The hounds, that scent so near their old grey enemy,
Throng at the Kennel doors and press to meet the
fray.
"Ho, boys, a thief! a thief!" the Keepers cry.

Wolf at the corner sits, his stiff grey back well
in it;
He shows his snarling teeth he bristles up his
hair;
He looks as if his eyes eat them then and there...

Then the old wolf tries to talk his way out of his predicament, but the Head-Keeper replies:

For my ideas I've long had my grounds;
And this , the plan I've always tried;
I count no truce with wolf is ratified!
Before I've stripped him of his hide!

This poem was a favorite of the Russian Army during the War of 1812. This wise peasant humor is part of Russian national identity and a source of pride (Stephanov p. 63). Poetry was transmitted orally among the illiterate soldiers.

Just as Krylov's fables are part of the Russian child's

literary heritage, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's, "Paul Revere's Ride" is part of our American literary heritage. Paul Revere and his horse have a significance and a mystery for American children:

A hurry of hoofs in a village street
A shape in the moonlight, a bulk in the dark
And from beneath, from the pebbles. in passing, a spark
Struck out by a steed flying fearles and fleet:
That was all! And yet, through the gloom and the light,
The fate of a nation was riding thatnight; (st. 8)

American children feel patriotc when they are read that poem and told of our country's hour of darkness, peril and need, and how Paul Revere saved the day by warning the patriots that the British were coming.

The Russian Soul

The spiritual destiny of their native land has always been one of the major themes of Russian poets. they believed that not only God, but God as imbued in nature, would guide Russia on a great spiritual mission. Nature is a source of enormous spiritual strength for the Russian people. In 1915 when Esenin wrote the following poem Russia was on the brink of

revolution. He compares sunlight streaming down on hills to holy oil, the sun will lead the Russian people to a better life.

Our faith is not extinguished
Holy are the songs and psalms.
The sun's holy oil pours
Onto the green hills.

(Esenin p. 82)

The stars are guiding lights for the nineteenth century peasants who called stars,"candles lit by God":

I want to believe in a better future with
The peasant women
Lighting a candle of the evening star...

(Esenin p. 109)

YvetushenKo speaKs for contemporary Russia:

"It seems we are divorced from nature and have unlearnt to breathe in branches. But in us love is alive to all that's Russian, green, dewy, and fragrent."

YevtushenKo wrote this when he was a young man, he was disillusioned with the Russian State, but he still believed in the simplicity and goodness of the Russian people.

The love of Russia and her people expressed by Esenin and YevtushenKo conveys a patriotism mixed with religious fervor, similar to our patriotic song,"America the Beautiful":

O beautiful for spacious skies,

For amber waves of grain,
For purple mountain majesties
Above the fruited plain!
God shed his grace on thee,
(st. 1)

Students given verses of each poem can see that a people's love of God and country are entwined. This is true of both Russians and the Americans.

Nature Symbols of Revolution and Industrialization

Storms and fogs, elements of untamed nature, symbolize the spirit of revolution. The seasons are transitional periods for both nature and the country. Spring is a symbol of revolution, a time of rebirth (Visson p. 88).

O ploughed fields, ploughed fields,
The sadness of provincial Russia!
On my heart is yesterday, and inside my heart Russia shines.
Like birds, the miles whistle from under my horses's hooves.
And the sun sprinkles its rain in handfuls over me.
Oh land of dreaded floods and of the gentle forces of Spring!

(Esenin pp. 392-393)

Pasternak contrasts nature and the modern city. His focus is not on re-birth and blooming, but on remembered sorrows, wars and urbanization).

Violently the spring bursts into Moscow houses.
Moths flutter out from behind wardrobes and crawl on
summer hats,
And fur coats are put away in trunks.
In the wooden mezzanines pots of stock and
wallflower are standing,
The rooms breathe an air of freedom,
And the attics smell of dust.
The street is on familiar terms with the bleary window,
And the sunset will not fail to meet the 'white night'
by the river.
In the passage you can hear what's going on outdoors,
And April's casual gossip with the falling drops
of thawing snow.
April knows a thousand stories of human sorrow;.....
And along the fences the afterglow
Grows chill and spins out the yarn.

(Pasternak pp. 338-339)

White nights refers to the sunlight hours extending late into the night during spring and summer in northern Russia. As we read the poem we should remember that 75% of the population

of the USSR lives north of the 54 parallel. This makes their climate quite different from ours, with the exception of Alaska, there's no place in the Unnited States where the sun shines for twenty two hours a day. The poem can serve as a good introduction in comparative geography.

Fellow poets and writers considered Esenin's revolutionary poem, "Singing Call" truly Russian, truly of the people. Here are the closing lines of the poem.

People, my brothers,
Where are you? Answer me!
I do not need you, fearless,
Blood thirsty knight.
I do not want your victory,
I need no tribute!
We are all apple trees and
cherry trees
In a blue orchard....
We did not come into the
world to destroy,
We came to love and believe

(Esenin p. 30)

The Revolution was followed by a period of rapid industrialization, a time when thousands of peasants were forcibly transferred from farms and villages to urban factories. For many dislocated peasants this was a time of

bitterness and disappointment,but for others the indusrtial age was a time of excitement about the future The modern industrial age was often symbolized by steel.

Mysterious world, my ancient world,
Like the wind you died down and sat down.
The neck of the village was crushed
By the highway's stone hands...
O city, city! In the cruel fight
You christened us like carrion and dregs.
The field cools in ox-eyed anguish,
Choking on telegraph poles.
Through stone and steel
I see the power of my native land.

(Esenin p. 131)

Esenin like other poets expressed the pain felt by the peasants who loved their villages and countryside and who were now compelled to live in cities.

Vachel Lindsay, an American poet, lamented the slaughter of buffaloes when the first transcontinental railroad was built and many prairie lands were cultivated, Here is Lindsay's "Flower Fed Buffaloes":

The flower fed buffaloes of the spring
In days of long ago,
Ranged where the locomotives sing
And the prairie flowers lie low;

The tossing blooming perfumed grass
Is swept away by wheat,
Wheels and wheels and wheels spin by
In the spring that still is sweet.
But the flower fed buffaloes of the spring
Left us long ago.

(Lindsay p. 433)

These poems express the fact that with industrial progress comes change. This might be a good time to discuss measures modern ecologists have taken to preserve the natural environment in planning cities and industrial parks. Esenin and Lindsay's poems contain a message that children will long retain.

Ancient Russian Mysticism

Russian mysticism might best be defined as a spiritual union of man, plants and the divine. Folklore existing from the time when Russia was a forest tells of mysterious beings who are in charge of the world:

"In the depth of the forest and among the pines lives the wood-devil, the Lyad. He has made his home in the pines from time immemorial. He wears a wide belt of red cloth, kaftan buttoned up from left to right instead of right to left; bast shoes on the wrong feet, eyes glowing like coals, and himself all made up of mosses and cones. If you want to see the Lyad,

you have to look over the right ear of a horse."

(Pilnak p. 16)

Folklore such as related by Pilnak can lead students to further investigation of another nation's culture and history. However, if Pilnak's writing at first seems too strange, compare it to William Blake's "The Tiger":

Tiger! Tiger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

(st. 1)

What the hammer? what the chain?
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

(st. 4)

When the stars threw down their spears,
And watered heaven with their tears,
Did He smile his work to see?
Did He who made the Lamb make the?

(st. 5)

The Lyad and the tiger are both mystical beings. The poets' writings convey different cultural attitudes toward the unknown. Pilnak looks at the Lyad obliquely "over the right ear of a horse". Blake's view is straight forward; he is clearly in

awe of the tiger whom he portrays as a menacing force of nature. PilnaK doesn't illuminate the character of the Lyad or tell how he feels about him.

PushKin weaves fairy tales and folKlore with mystical elements into his poetry. His nurse, Arina, was the source of his prologue to "Ruslan and Liudmila":

An oaKtree greening by the ocean;
A golden chain around it wound:
Whereon a learned cat, in motion
Both day and night, will walK around;
On walKing right, he sings a ditty;
On walKing left, he tells a lay.
A magic place: there wends his way
The woodsprite, there's a mermaid sitting
In branches, there on trails past KnowWing
Are tracKs of beasts you never met;
On chicKen feet a hut is set
With neither door or window showing.

(PushKin p. 5)

When Ruslan and Liudmila was first published in 1820,while PushKin was still a school boy, the public considered it the beginning of a great poet of the Russian land. Not only was the content Russian, the Russian language was molded into classical poetic form for the first time(Arndt p. xxi). Of greater significance for American teachers, is the fact that PushKin's

verse recreates the colorful peasant imagination for our students' enjoyment.

Summarizing Final Thoughts

Poems about nature can provide American students an opportunity to cultivate an understanding of Russian culture --an appreciation of Russian attitudes and feelings about nature which encompass the land, history, and the people.

The Russians' deep,sensual perspection of nature focuses on a land geographically quite different from ours, a northern land where many people live in bucolic isolation. Nature is a source of humor when they expose their enemies in satirical poetry. Russian faith in life is restored by the contemplation of nature. Perhaps, more importantly as we study Russian nature poems, we look at nature from a Russian's prespective and are given a glimpse of a profound aesthetic appreciation of nature somewhat like ours so a common bond is established.

Notes: This paper was written as a result of my participation in the NEH Harvard Institute On Russian and Soviet History and Culture the summer of 1985. I wish to thank Janet Vaillant and Susan Zayer of the Harvard Russian Research Center for their comments and suggestions.

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